

Down the Rabbit Hole with Marie Antoinette: Falling into Sofia Coppola's Wonderland

Award-winning screenwriter and director Sofia Coppola sails into uncharted territory when her 2006 film *Marie Antoinette* is met with negative reviews, many of which are downright scathing. The bulk of the criticism is directed toward the void of historical politics in the film, with reviewers like Alex Von Tunzelmann of *The Guardian* accusing the film of being “all just shopping and cupcakes” (1), and Eric Woidtke of *Cinema Blend* asserting that Coppola “forgot to write a screenplay” (1), further referring to the film as “frivolous and lightweight” (2) and a regrettable “triumph of style over substance” (2). This is rather harsh criticism for Coppola, fresh off her multiple Academy Award nominations for the ingenious 2003 film *Lost in Translation*, which took the win for Best Screenplay.

Interestingly, in the midst of the deluge of negativity, it is film-reviewer-extraordinaire Roger Ebert who shines a light of favorability toward *Marie Antoinette*. While acknowledging that Coppola does indeed gloss over the political aspects of the story, he states the reason for it quite plainly: “That is because we are entirely within Marie’s world” (1). Ebert’s idea can be taken a bit further, because that world, which is the world of Marie Antoinette according to Sofia Coppola, is exactly what one might expect of her: it’s like Wonderland. Coppola is notorious for creating atmospheric, fantasy-land-like stories which seclude the main characters from the outside world, inviting the audience to experience their inner worlds instead, and *Marie Antoinette* falls in line with this stylistic trait. The film is unavoidably marketed as a historical drama, but that description merely encompasses its shell. At its heart, *Marie Antoinette* is a character piece and an artistic creation, and it should be judged accordingly.

In regards to the lack of historical content in this film, it must be acknowledged that the naysayers are not without merit. It isn't unreasonable to expect that a film based on a historical figure would be ripe with historical content, and *Marie Antoinette* certainly is not. The political undertakings of the day barely make an appearance, and in the final scenes of the film, the angry mob that appears and proceeds to besiege the castle seems to materialize out of nowhere. Perhaps most importantly, if a viewer does not agree with a sympathetic portrayal of Marie Antoinette (hereafter referred to as M.A.), then the mise en scène may indeed be viewed as little more than fluff and feathers—at times, spectacle threatens to overwhelm the narrative. Yet Coppola's screenplay is based upon Antonia Fraser's critically-acclaimed biography *Marie Antoinette: The Journey* and she collaborated with Fraser throughout much of the project, which is revealed by Fraser herself in a 2006 article written for *Vanity Fair* entitled "Sofia's Choice." In regards to historical content, Fraser reports, "When [Coppola] asked me lightly, 'Would it matter if I leave out the politics?' I replied with absolute honesty, 'Marie Antoinette would have adored that'" (4). Fraser also mentions that what Coppola liked most about the biography was that it was "full of life, not a dry historical drama" (1), expressing praise that Fraser had "humanized" (2) M.A. From this, we can infer that Coppola's choice to skim over the historical content is not by mistake, but by design.

In *Women Directors and Their Films*, Mary G. Hurd points out that "Coppola excels at providing meticulous details that contribute to the creation of mood and states of being and at providing emotional buildups within the narrative" (133). While this method provides ample opportunity to reveal emotional depth within Coppola's characters, at the same time it gives her films that whimsical, fantasy-like feeling. *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), Coppola's first feature film, is about five teenage girls who are unreasonably restricted by their parents, which eventually leads them all to take their own lives. The story unfolds through the memories of four grown men, who were classmates of the girls during their childhood, allowing Coppola to "bathe the screen with dreamy memories of an idealized past . . . presented through [the men's] unrealistic, soft-focus recollections" (Hurd 131). The technique creates unreliable narration throughout the film, which adds to the Wonderland-

like aspect of the story and—more importantly—challenges the audience to look deeper than the surface presentation.

In *Lost in Translation*, the two main characters are Americans who experience the fantasy-like atmosphere of a foreign country (Japan). This secludes them from their external world and subjects them to nonsensical circumstances due to the American/Japanese cultural differences and the language barrier. In *The Coppolas: A Family Business*, the film is referred to as “a reverie about loneliness in a foreign place” (100) and is further described as being “about two people . . . who are lost in the same way. Their loss is the aloneness that comes from the sense of detachment from the lives that have been defined for them, and the emptiness they experience when they attempt to carry out those assigned definitions” (102). Coppola’s idea of being “lost in translation” can easily be seen as a metaphor for the universal challenge humanity experiences in regards to connecting the outer persona we all project with our rich, secluded inner worlds. Perhaps it may even seem at times as if we are speaking one language externally and another internally. *Lost in Translation* is thought-provoking and fascinating, and it is no surprise that it received resounding critical acclaim.

Other Coppola films that portray a fantasy-like atmosphere are *Somewhere* (2010) and *The Bling Ring* (2013). In *Somewhere*, a little girl (Elle Fanning) is deposited by her mother into the care of her father (Stephen Dorff), who is a famous actor living at a Hollywood retreat. The child experiences the dream-like world of fame and fortune, which rings a bit hollow until she is eventually able to connect emotionally with her father. This same Hollywood Wonderland atmosphere is echoed in *The Bling Ring*, which is a film based on actual events depicting teenagers who break into the houses of celebrities to steal various items and trinkets, in an effort to elevate the status of their lives to equal that of the whimsical world celebrities are perceived to live in. The kids are eventually caught and faced with the consequences of their actions, illustrating that the pursuit of a life of superficiality ultimately leads to a dead end.

This returns us to *Marie Antoinette*, which illustrates a character whose misfortunate life also leads her into a resounding, and quite literal, dead end. It isn’t difficult to imagine why Coppola might have been drawn to this story. Down the rabbit hole from Austrian

archduchess to Dauphine of France, the young M.A.'s journey takes her from her childhood home to a foreign land with foreign customs and complete with foreign, nonsensical circumstances. The scene with M.A. (played superbly by Kirsten Dunst) standing naked in her bedchamber comes to mind, while the delayed entrance of female courtiers who continually increase in rank renders M.A. desperate and shivering as she waits for one of them to finally place her dressing gown over her head—at which point she understandably declares, “This is ridiculous.” This scene and others seem absurd enough to rival the experiences undertaken by Lewis Carroll’s little fictional Alice in the actual *Wonderland* stories. It is through the presentation of these kinds of Wonderland-like scenes that the tone is set for emotional depth—Coppola is inviting the audience to identify with M.A.

It is important to note that the circumstances surrounding M.A. as portrayed in this film are not simply imagined by Coppola—choosing to leave out the politics doesn’t mean she left out the facts—the narrative in regards to the life of M.A. is still quite faithful to Fraser’s biography. At the same time, Coppola does allow herself creative license and the story comes to life beneath her artistic hand—which makes it unique to her. The Wonderland atmosphere of the film is obviously attributed entirely to Coppola. She has also given the film a jarring, post-punk rock soundtrack, and strangely, this undeniably modern music somehow manages to feel diegetic. The opening credits roll in hot pink lettering against a black background and the first scene, which is presented in prologue, depicts M.A. dressed in overdone frills and an extravagant white feather hat as she reclines in a richly upholstered powder blue chair, while an attendant places shoes upon her feet. She is surrounded by little tea tables filled with elaborately decorated cakes and tarts. The scene is the absolute picture of Wonderland. M.A. dips her finger into the icing of the cake nearest to her, and then breaks the fourth wall with a defiant gaze at her audience, as if she wishes to say: This is *my* story, and it’s going to be all about *me*.

Why shouldn’t it be? Historical criticism surrounding the life and actions of M.A. is often harsh and unforgiving, but Coppola paints an illuminating picture. When the narrative of the film opens, the first shot depicts M.A. as a child sleeping in bed, with her hand carefully positioned beside her face to appear as if she is sucking her thumb. When her

carriage door is opened after her journey from Austria to the handover on the border with France, M.A. childishly asks, “Are we there yet?” Minutes later, her beloved puppy is pried from her grasp as she is handed over to her French attendant. Coppola has designed these scenes to remind us that M.A. is a child at the time her life is set out for her, and as such, she is *innocent*. Equally important is the fact that as a child, especially since she is a *female* child, she has no voice. As Fraser puts it, M.A. is viewed “not as an individual, but as a piece on her mother’s chessboard” (13). She is relegated to become a child bride (at age 14) not by choice, but as a result of political negotiations between Austria and France.

The arranged marriage is only the beginning of the feminine oppression heaped upon this young lady’s shoulders. She is down the rabbit hole, and one of the strangest affairs surrounding her life is the fact that her marriage remains unconsummated for seven years—which M.A. is blamed for. Fraser attributes this impotence as “the refusal of a gawky adolescent boy to act the husband” (85) and clearly, Coppola agrees. She casts Jason Schwartzman in the roll of Louis Auguste, and he plays the part of a fumbling, bumbling idiot rather well. He is gangly and Roman-nosed, and he is barely equal in height with Kirsten Dunst. Coppola draws his character pointedly—in the scene where M.A. is introduced to him as his fiancé, he can scarcely look her in the eye, struggling with the amount of effort it takes him to simply say, “Welcome, Madame.” The wedding ceremony doesn’t change this—the charm and beauty of young M.A. is not enough to draw the Dauphin out of his shell—he wants absolutely nothing to do with her in bed.

The whimsical, fantasy-land atmosphere Coppola creates to surround M.A.’s life as the Dauphine is juxtaposed against the emotional angst she experiences—and in this way it is highlighted. In regards to her husband’s rejection of her, much of the anguish M.A. experiences comes as a result of her mother’s words—delivered by voice-over as M.A. reads her letters—while Coppola focuses closely upon her face to present the audience with her tortured expression. In one notable scene, after M.A.’s mother declares that “the heart of [her] personal failure is [her] inability to inspire sexual passion in her husband,” M.A. faces her reflection in a mirror and turns herself back and forth, as if trying to determine what shortcomings her husband finds in her. She does try to gain his approval: she attempts to

speak with him about his hobby of lock making, she puts together luncheons for his hunting party, she bathes and perfumes herself before bed and snuggles up to him suggestively—all to no avail—and it goes on for *years*. In a particularly effective scene, after M.A.’s mother informs her yet again how “dangerous” her unconsummated marriage is and that “everything depends upon the wife, if she is willing and sweet,” M.A. breaks that forth wall again, gazing at the audience with tears in her eyes and defeat written across her face, as if to ask, “How can this be?” Such is the life of a female in 17th century France, even if she is the Dauphine, and eventually, the Queen.

Coppola is careful with her presentation of the scenes surrounding M.A.’s extravagant spending, gambling, and entertaining—these scenes unfold directly after M.A. has experienced some form of disappointment. The continued sexual rejection she faces from her husband is paramount, as it results in public humiliation due to M.A.’s resulting incapability to produce an heir. The worst of this despair is presented in the heart-wrenching scene revealing M.A.’s reaction after her sister-in-law gives birth to a son. At the onset, the setting for this scene consists only of the wall M.A. leans back against as she cries. The camera moves in for an extreme close up, with M.A.’s face nearly filling the entire frame, which directs the audience to focus solely upon her—and her anguish. The final shot of the scene cuts to a wide frame to reveal the extravagance of the room—white walls encrusted in gold, elaborately embroidered curtains, with M.A. crumpled in a corner of the room. She is sitting in Wonderland as she sobs. The very next scene unfolds directly to reveal cause and effect: it depicts M.A. on a shopping spree and snapping her fingers at attendants to demand this or that, while the song “I Want Candy” by new wave artists Bow Wow Wow rolls on the soundtrack. Fraser states it this way: M.A.’s frivolous behavior “kept her away from the sleeping king, which she probably intended, and contributed to her financial problems, which she certainly did not” (141).

It isn’t difficult to imagine why M.A. tried to drown herself in the extravagant, albeit superficial, comforts of Wonderland. It was her only form of consolation. Throughout the film, Coppola illustrates the powerlessness M.A. experiences during her attempts to establish any semblance of identity, aside from the one that has been imposed upon her as the result

of family alliances. As a child, she has no voice at all. As a woman, she develops a voice—it is simply ignored. M.A. is constantly being told what to do, or what to say, primarily by the Mistress of the Household, Contesse De Noailles, whose frosty demeanor is displayed early in the film when she refuses to return young M.A.’s embrace upon their introduction—she is also the one who pries that puppy out of the girl’s arms. When M.A. is finally blessed with the birth of her first child (a beautiful baby girl who, sadly, is informed by M.A. that she is “not what was desired”) it is cold-faced Contesse De Noailles who prevents her from carrying out her wish of feeding her own child.

Ambassador Mercy is next in line to keep M.A. on the straight and narrow of formal French customs—it goes as far as preventing her from standing by her own opinion of Madame Du Barry (King Louis XV’s mistress). In a scene depicting M.A. reclining in her personal chamber, while she pops self-soothing truffles into her mouth, she asks Ambassador Mercy, “Why should I approve of [the King’s] cavorting with a harlot?” Ultimately, she is forced to address the unsavory woman in public. This is mild compared to the unrealistic expectations placed upon her in regards to maintaining the alliance between Austria and France. Coppola illustrates this with a scene between Ambassador Mercy and M.A. where he informs her of the threat of degeneration between the two countries due to the rumblings of war. M.A. asks “Where will I be if there is a rupture between our two families? Am I to be Austrian, or the Dauphine of France?” His response to her is: “You must be both.” It is not possible for a woman who is not given a voice in political matters to represent an alliance with both sides of any kind of conflict between these two countries. This is simply an unreasonable demand.

If there is a single scene that sums up the essence of what Coppola accomplishes in regards to illuminating the inner world of M.A., it is the poignant scene she constructs of M.A. standing alone on an exterior balcony of the grand, Wonderland-like castle she resides in. This scene begins with a medium close shot with the focus centered upon M.A. to reveal her disillusioned demeanor, and then, as her mother berates her (in voice-over) with the ever growing list of her shortcomings as the Dauphine of France, the camera zooms out into an extreme long shot. M.A. grows smaller and smaller within the frame as the enormity of the

castle seems to swallow her. This scene is clearly meant to represent the gravity of the circumstances M.A. finds herself in, circumstances that completely overwhelm her, illustrating that M.A. deserves to be viewed as much more than the frivolous spend-thrift Queen who found herself the centerpiece of the hatred of the people of France.

Coppola's atmospheric Wonderland in *Marie Antoinette* seems designed to represent—and then to challenge—the perception of the audience in regards to the life of M.A., who was surely one of the most demoralized, and *demonized*, women who ever lived. Despite the history surrounding the story, the politics—unless it's gender politics, which would have been largely indiscernible at the time—are simply not the point of Coppola's film. This allows her focus to center upon that inner world of M.A.—and the Wonderland-like environment she falls into—generating the kind of creative atmosphere from which Sofia Coppola shines.

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